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Multisensorial Musings on Miniature Matters

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This issue of ‘Das Mittelalter’ explores the voice of small things.¹ We approach artefacts that are no bigger than one’s hand not as silent witnesses to people’s lives, but as agents that actively engage with human beings through the senses, shape their social identities and evoke emotions.² For close to forty years or more, archaeologists have argued that medieval people understood objects to have particular social meaning as indicated by the curation of heirlooms, the re-use of prehistoric axes as grave gifts, or the special relationship to devotional objects such as pilgrim badges.³ A similar situation exists across other cognate disciplines from discussions of seals in art history or the particular meanings of things in plays as discussed by literary scholars.⁴ When the miniature scale is addressed, it

1 John Mack, *The Art of Small Things*. Cambridge MA 2007; Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense. A Cultural History of Touch*. Urbana 2012; Kristján Mímisson and Gylfi Magnússon Sigurður, *Singularizing the Past. The History and Archaeology of the Small and Ordinary*. In: *Journal of Social Archaeology* 14/2 (2014), p. 131–156; Frits Scholten, *Scale, Prayer and Play*. In: Frits Scholten (ed.), *Small Worlds. Late-Gothic Boxwood Micro-Carvings from the Low Countries*. Amsterdam 2016, p. 171–210; Carrie Rebora Barratt, *Connections. Small Things*, a video from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, http://www.metmuseum.org/connections/small_things/ (accessed: 11/05/2020).

2 Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge 1986; Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, *The Cultural Biography of Objects*. In: *World Archaeology* 31/2 (1999), p. 169–178; Janet Hoskins, *Agency, Biography and Objects*. In: Christopher Tilley (ed.), *Handbook of Material Culture*. London 2006, p. 74–84; Matt Edgeworth, *Fluids Past. Archaeology of Flow*. London 2011.

3 Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life. Archaeology and The Life Course*. Woodbridge 2012; Mark Hall, *Approaching Medieval Sacrality*. In: Christopher M. Gerrard and Alejandra Gutiérrez (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Later Medieval Archaeology in Britain*. Oxford 2018, p. 614–626.

4 Markus Späth, *Art for New Corporations. Seal Imagery of French Urban Communities in the Thirteenth Century*. In: Susan Solway (ed.), *Medieval Coins and Seals. Constructing Identity, Signifying Power*. Turnhout 2015, p. 331–346; Jitske Jasperse, Matilda, Leonor and Joanna. *The Plantagenet*

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often is in terms of the uniqueness of an object with a particular emphasis placed on craftwork and materials or related to their biographies and histories of use. Much less attention has been paid to bodily, sensorial and emotive experiences, that is, the 'corporeal choreographies' that can result from the engagement with the diminutive.⁵ This is remarkable because scholarship has acknowledged that our perception of the smallness or bigness of things is related to our own sense of the body (especially in relation to the scale of the hand), thus implying a sensual connection and intimacy between the small and the human body.⁶ Moreover, when turning to the medieval material, an awareness of size is apparent. In medieval inventories – of which some examples are given here by textile expert Patricia STROHMAIER – scale matters in terms of order, monetary value and object status, thus serving as a category of classification.⁷ This also holds true for the 'signet', a small seal also known as privy seal, that because of its size was set apart from the 'great seal' (*sigillum magnum*).⁸ These diminutive seal matrices could be gemstones set in rings and pendants made of gold and silver. We know of instances when these personal items were bestowed on heirs, thus passing along the identity, memory and possibly even love of the gift giver. As ring or pendant, the small signet was held close, worn on or held in the hand, serving as

Sisters and the Display of Dynastic Connections Through Material Culture. In: *Journal of Medieval History* 43/5 (2017), p. 523–547; Daisy Black, 'Nayles Large and Lang'. *Masculine Identity and the Anachronic Object in the York Crucifixion Play*. In: *Medieval Feminist Forum* 50 (2015), p. 85–104; Anna Mühlherr et al. (eds.), *Dingkulturen. Objekte in Literatur, Kunst und Gesellschaft der Vormoderne (Literatur – Theorie – Geschichte 9)*. Berlin, Boston 2016.

5 Andrew Cochran, *Representational Approaches to Irish Passage Tombs. Legacies, Burdens, Opportunities*. In: Benjamin Alberti, Andrew Meirion Jones, and Joshua Pollard (eds.), *Archaeology After Interpretation. Returning Materials to Archaeological Theory*. London 2016, p. 345–368.

6 Mack (note 1), p. 53. Andrew Meirion Jones, *Prehistoric Materialities. Becoming Material in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland*. Oxford 2012, p. 31–70; Silke Tammen, *Bild und Heil am Körper. Reliquiaranhänger*. In: Kristin Marek and Martin Schulz (eds.), *Kanon Kunstgeschichte. Einführung in Werke und Methoden*. Vol. 1: *Mittelalter*. Munich 2015, p. 299–322; Martina Bagnoli (ed.), *A Feast for the Senses. Art and Experience in Medieval Europe (The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore)*. New Haven, London 2016; Silke Tammen and Romina Ebenhöch, *Wearing books*. In: David Ganz and Barbara Schwellewald (eds.), *Clothing Sacred Scriptures. Book Art and Book Religion in Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Cultures*. Berlin 2018, p. 171–183.

7 For example, the 1328 sale inventory of Clémence de Hongrie, which contains several entries in which size is specified. See Mariah Proctor-Tiffany, *Medieval Art in Motion. The Inventory and Gift Giving of Queen Clémence de Hongrie*. University Park PA 2019, appendix 2, p. 151–175. Another example is the 1482/85 inventory of the Guelph Treasure. See Andrea Boockmann, *Die verlorene Teile des 'Welfenschatzes'. Eine Übersicht anhand des Reliquienverzeichnisses von 1482 der Stiftskirche St. Blasius in Braunschweig*. Göttingen 1997.

8 John A. McEwan, *Does Size Matter? Seals in England and Wales, ca. 1200–1250*. In: Laura J. Whatley (ed.), *A Companion to Seals in the Middle Ages*. Leiden, Boston 2019, p. 103–126.

a constant reminder to its original owner, which, in turn, facilitated a more personal and emotive attachment to the seal.⁹ Explicit mentions of smallness, for example in the case of statuettes, seem to indicate more profound connections between the object and its owner, as is pointed out in this issue by Cornelius BERTHOLD and Lieke SMITS. So, scale, which is an inescapable characteristic of objects, affects the item's 'thingness' because it in part defines aspects of the relational interactions between people, animals or even other things.¹⁰

Our emphasis on the small and the sensory challenges the 'master' narrative so prominent in medieval studies which emphasises visual spectacle and grand scale enterprises.¹¹ This includes a focus on religious buildings and castles, which feature largely in art history, archaeology and literary studies but are typically absent from the micro-scale of daily life. Rather, by investigating how small things and people interact, alternative stories emerge that capture the sensory and emotional experiences of all people at various stages of their life course.¹² Collectively, the articles in this issue show that small things can tell big stories – they reveal the desires and motivations of people as well as reflecting on their ways of being in the world. Here, we explore this area for the first time by investigating how scale might increase an item's potency through a sensory lens. Sources for these studies come from a variety of medieval contexts, ranging from literary texts to clay-pipe figurines and from textile bags to miniature Korans.

Sensing #TimesUp: Moving Away from the Dominant Discourse

The study of the senses is firmly grounded in the social sciences and humanities, including medieval studies.¹³ While many research areas including art history and

9 Caroline Simonet, *The (Re-)Use of Ancient Gems and Coins. The Presence of Antiquity in Medieval Sigillography*. In: Whatley (note 8), p. 355–395.

10 On things and objects, see Bill Brown, *Thing Theory*. In: *Critical Inquiry* 28/1 (2001), p. 1–22; Susan D. Gillespie, *Journey's End (?)*. *The Travels of La Venta Offering 4*. In: Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie (eds.), *Things in Motion. Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice*. Sante Fe New Mexico 2015, p. 39–61.

11 Jasperse (note 4), p. 523–547; Karen Dempsey, *Gender and Medieval Archaeology. Storming the Castle*. In: *Antiquity* 93/369 (2019), p. 722–788; Karen Dempsey et al., *Beyond the Martial Façade. Gender, Heritage and Medieval Castles*. In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1636119> (accessed: 11/05/2020).

12 Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*. Durham 2007.

13 This emergent field received its own journal, *The Senses and Society* in 2006.

archaeology – our own specific areas of study – have been slowly developing sensorial approaches for over twenty years, these considerations are not yet widespread, and further explorations are required for the medieval period in particular.¹⁴ This is surprising, since we are, and always have been sentient beings. While the senses are of course experienced in contextually and culturally specific ways which no doubt changes over time, we cannot ignore their existence and must reach out and draw them into our investigations. Can the marginal role these studies play be accounted for by a fear related to false notions of objectivity within which the sensual, emotive and ‘ordinary’ fit uncomfortably?¹⁵ Perhaps this explains that when the senses are explored in medieval studies the primary source material usually comes from clerical writers who voiced their specific male worldview on religious and social matters.¹⁶ In other words, the Authorised Discourse or Voice. This is a theme that connects many publications on the senses in the Middle Ages which largely focus on the role of the five senses in liturgy and how medieval theologians addressed the full sensorium. Éric PALAZZO’s 2012 overview is a good example of how theological, philosophical and literary approaches dominate.¹⁷

In a move away from these more typical considerations, a recent open access publication on medieval sound and soundscapes seeks to collect voices, noises and silences from a wide variety of spaces, including streets, religious houses, and battlefields. By doing so the authors aim to reconstruct sound landscapes based on the sounds that define spaces and on the voices that construct and give authority.¹⁸ But here too the dominant narratives of the medieval past are present

14 Sarah Tarlow, *The Archaeology of Emotion and Affect*. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012), p. 169–185; Chris M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*. New Haven CT 2006.

15 Oliver T. Harris and Tim Flohr Sørensen, *Rethinking Emotion and Material Culture*. In: *Archaeological Dialogues* 17/2 (2010), p. 145–163; Mary Weismantel, *Coming to Our Senses at Chavín de Huantar*. In: Jo Day (ed.), *Making Senses of the Past: Toward a Sensory Archaeology* (Center for Archaeological Investigations Occasional Paper 40). Carbondale 2013, p. 113–136.

16 See Fiona Griffiths and Kathryn Starkey (eds.), *Sensory Reflections. Traces of Experience in Medieval Artifacts* (Sense, Matter, and Mediums. New Approaches to Medieval Literary and Material Culture 1). Berlin 2018, p. 4–6, 12.

17 Éric Palazzo, *Les cinq sens au Moyen Âge. État de la question et perspectives de recherche*. In: *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 55 (2012), p. 339–366; Éric Palazzo, *L’invention chrétienne des cinq sens dans la liturgie et l’art au Moyen Âge*. Paris 2014.

18 Gerard Rodríguez, Éric Palazzo, and Gisela Coronado Schwindt (eds.), *Paisajes sonoros medievales*. Mar del Plata 2019, p. 6. [http://giemmardelplata.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rodríguez et. al – Paisajes sonoros medievales.pdf](http://giemmardelplata.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rodríguez%20et%20al%20-%20Paisajes%20sonoros%20medievales.pdf) (accessed: 11/05/2020). The introduction to this volume contains abundant references to recent scholarship on the senses. See also Carme Muntaner Alsina et al. (eds.), *Sensual and Sensory Experiences in the Middle Ages. On Pleasure, Fear, Desire and Pain*. Newcastle upon Tyne 2018.

in stories of, by or about (mostly white) elite men. With a different emphasis in mind, and eschewing the traditional focus of the sensorial canon, Eleanor STANDLEY's current research discusses the materiality of medieval emotions of 'ordinary' people, showing how seemingly mundane objects such as a plough coulter or certain dress accessories are embodied with ideas of love and hope.¹⁹ Similarly, taking a rare gendered approach, Richard NEWHAUSER interprets the plough as an object (or site) through which a sensory understanding of a peasant medieval masculinity can take place.²⁰ Clearly, the senses are an exciting and engaging area, as is shown in many other articles in Fiona GRIFFITH's and Kathryn STARKEY's recent edited volume, which endeavoured to examine medieval people's sensory lives through their relationships with various objects from song books or almanacs to pin beaters and the previously mentioned ploughs.²¹

In this issue of 'Das Mittelalter', we are interested in further pursuing the idea of sensory relations of people and things, what Chris WOOLGAR, in his book on the senses in late medieval England, has summed up as how "medieval people behaved in their daily lives" and follow closely Constance CLASSEN's endeavours to redress the "lifeless puppet" approach where people in the past are not imbued with feelings.²² Our special issue builds on these studies: we focus on small objects through the lens of sensorium, and the often intense personal relationship that is forged. This can help us learn more about embodied actions including devotion.²³ Furthermore, it can reveal unique individual experiences that may divulge to some degree the complex interiority of medieval sensorial lives. For this issue we asked the authors at various career stages to engage with the full sensorium in order to come to a closer understanding of people's lived experiences. We were well aware of the challenges our request posed. Not only because different object types and materials – including miniature Korans, literary texts, textile bags, golden bracteates, clay-pipe figurines and a bronze candlestick – invoke different sensory experiences, but also because of the different disciplines our authors come from as well as their own particular academic standpoint.

19 Eleanor Standley. *Love and Hope. Emotions, Dress Accessories and a Plough in Later Medieval Britain, c. AD 1250–1500*. In: *Antiquity* 94/375 (2020), p. 742–759.

20 Richard Newhauser. "putten to ploughe". *Touching the peasant sensory community*. In: Griffiths / Starkey (note 16), p. 225–248.

21 Griffiths / Starkey (note 16).

22 Woolgar (note 14), p. 1; Classen (note 1), p. xii.

23 See for example Mary Weismantel, *Obstinate Things*. In: Barbara L. Voss and Eleanor Conlin Casella (eds.), *The Archaeology of Colonialism. Intimate Encounters and Sexual Effects*. New York 2012, p. 303–320.

On our journey of editing this volume of ‘Das Mittelalter’, we have discovered that there are numerous ways in which the senses and emotive experiences of different people can be addressed through their relationship with small things. Given the vast terrain, we were unable to cover all grounds, such as the lived sensory experience of ill, differently abled and various gendered bodies. How would non-normative bodies have experienced the material sensorial world around them? What would their sensory engagement with small objects, like the minute votive offerings in the shapes of body parts have been?²⁴ We embrace these other avenues as opportunities for further work. Just as studies have shown gender or position in the life course played important roles in different life stages, we believe emotional and sensorial experiences must be incorporated into scholarly considerations too if we want fuller accounts of people in the past.²⁵

Sensing New Horizons

We seek new pathways to explore the social lives of small things; why they were curated, contemplated on, and often adored by medieval people through the sensorial lens of taste, sight, touch, smell and sound. The senses provide an exciting avenue for our engagement with diminutive items because they invite us to go beyond sight, which often dominates interpretations of the past. Anthropologists have highlighted that the number of senses making up the sensorium as well as the different hierarchies in senses vary from one culture to the next, thus reminding us that the eye is just one in a range of receptors.²⁶ For sensorial studies, vision is understood as fundamental to how images, objects, architecture and of course small things were created, become imbued or embodied with meaning through the user, viewer or creator.²⁷ In the medieval period, sight was not only about ‘vision’ but was also seen as a way of feeling, touching, transmitting and receiving back.²⁸ Moreover, speech (coming from the mouth with its lips and tongue)

24 The role of artefacts, other than prosthetics, in the lives of the impaired is not addressed in Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages. Cultural Considerations*. London 2015.

25 Gilchrist (note 3).

26 David Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience. A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*. Toronto 1991; Yannis Hamilakis, *Archaeology and the Senses. Human Experience, Memory, and Affect*. Cambridge 2014; Yannis Hamilakis, *Afterword. Eleven Theses on the Archaeology of the Senses*. In: Jo Day (note 15), p. 409–420.

27 Kate Giles, *Seeing and Believing. Visuality and Space in Pre-Modern England*. In: *World Archaeology* 39/1 (2007), p. 105–121; Robert S. Nelson, *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*. Cambridge 2009.

28 Susan Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. Basingstoke 2002.

seems to have been an additional sense.²⁹ This blurred the lines between senses such as taste (done with tongue) and touch, usually understood as done by the hands, but which could also be done with the lips or tongue, for example when kissing a saint's shrine, lord's clothes or the much smaller pax.³⁰ Thus, sight, which dominates much of the scholarship on material culture, was not necessarily perceived as the most important sense to medieval people nor understood in the same way.³¹

Ocularcentrism can be explained in part by medieval theology and philosophy which prioritized seeing, but also stems from modern art historical, archaeological and literary approaches which emphasise visual culture, including images or texts.³² This is a patriarchal outlook, which cannot be disentangled from 'the male gaze' first explored by Laura MULVEY in Film Studies as a way of highlighting the impact of patriarchy on ways of seeing.³³ This esteem for the eye had distinctive societal impact. Supremacist and colonial enterprises engendered a debasement of other senses such as 'touch' and 'smell', and prioritised sight as more civilised, thus effectively using the senses to culturally racialize human beings.³⁴ A related othering took place in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when odour developed into an important signifier of group and class distinction, demarcating the deodorized bourgeoisie from the poor and scented lower classes living in the same cities.³⁵ Of course, this too, has shaped the modern perception of 'seeing'.

29 Woolgar: Senses in Late Medieval England (note 14); Chris M. Woolgar, *The Social Life of the Senses. Experiencing the Self, Others, and Environments*. In: Richard G. Newhauser (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*. London 2014, p. 23–44.

30 Kim M. Phillips, *The Invisible Man. Body and Ritual in a Fifteenth-Century Noble Household*. In: *Journal of Medieval History* 31 (2005), p. 143–162.

31 See also Richard G. Newhauser, *Introduction: The Sensual Middle Ages*. In: Newhauser: *Cultural History of the Senses* (note 29), p. 1–22.

32 Giles (note 27).

33 Madeline H. Caviness. *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages. Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy*. Philadelphia 2001; Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In: *Screen* 16/3 (1975), p. 6–18.

34 On touch, see Classen: *The Deepest Sense* (note 1), p. xii. On smell, see Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense. Exploring the Senses in History Across Cultures*. London, New York 1993, chapter 4; Constance Classen, David Howes, Anthony Synnot, *Aroma. The Cultural History of Smell*. New York 1994; and also Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. Cambridge 2018, in which some medieval examples of racializing the senses are given.

35 Alain Corbin, *Pesthauch und Blütenduft. Eine Geschichte des Geruchs*. Transl. by Grete Osterwald. Berlin 2005 (French original edition Paris 1982). Smell as normative category is by no means a European phenomenon, nor is it an early modern invention, see Classen: *Worlds of Sense* (note 34);

This is not to deny that seeing with the eyes – which entails different forms of reading as well – was not an important aspect of medieval culture; through it knowledge about God and his visible and invisible world came to people. Whereas taste and touch – connected with food and sex – were in theory considered the lowest of the five senses (or at least, this is what we know from clerical writers). Foul odours were believed to spread sickness,³⁶ and while preventing the spread of diseases by covering cadavers and excrements was a relatively easy solution, with epidemic diseases more drastic measures were needed, including social distancing and quarantine.³⁷ As an aid against illnesses of all sorts people also used small objects that were imbued with prophylactic qualities. Stones, relics, strips of parchments with texts, but also coins, beads and herbs were thought to hold protective and healing powers.³⁸ The material, archaeological and written record show that these stones, relics and other diminutive items could be preserved in tiny textile bags kept in people's private possessions.³⁹ Carried around the neck, these soft containers for highly valued (but not necessarily costly) items, sometimes elaborately decorated, invited to be touched by the fingers and lips, were caressed against the skin, and sometimes even smelled. It is through these small things rather than theological or medical treatises that we can explore how people's experiences were shaped through the interaction with objects that they touched, smelled, tasted and heard.

Taking a leap forward in time, we can see that the belief in prophylactic powers of such amulet pouches in times of crisis was a long-lasting one, as can be inferred from a photograph depicting five American boys wearing bags of camphor around their necks in the hope of escaping the Influenza epidemic of 1918–

Mark Smith, *Transcending, Othering, Detecting. Smell, Premodernity, Modernity*. In: *Postmedieval* 3 (2012), p. 380–390.

36 Carol Rawcliffe, *Delectable Sights and Fragrant Smelles. Gardens and Health in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*. In: *Garden History* 36 (2008), p. 3–21.

37 Lara Thorpe, 'At the Mercy of a Strange Woman'. *Plague Nurses, Marginality, and Fear during the Great Plague of 1665*. In: Aidan Norrie and Lisa Hopkins (eds.), *Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe*. Amsterdam 2019, p. 29–44; Guy Geltner, *Getting Medieval on COVID? The Risks of Periodizing Public Health*. In: *History News Network*: <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/174758> (accessed: 11/05/2020).

38 *Marbode of Rennes' (1035–1123) 'De Lapidibus', considered as a Medical Treatise with Text, Commentary and C.W. King's Translation Together with Text and Translation of Marbode's Minor Works on Stones*. Ed. and trans. by John M. Riddle. Wiesbaden 1977; Roberta Gilchrist, *Magic for the Dead? The Archaeology of Magic in Later Medieval Burials*. In: *Medieval Archaeology* 52 (2008), p. 119–159.

39 Karen Dempsey, *Herstory. Exploring the Material Life of Gundrada de Warenne*. In: Emma O'Loughlin Bérat, Irina Dumitrescu and Rebecca Hardie (eds.) *Relations of Power. Women's Networks in the Middle Ages*. Bonn 2020 (forthcoming).

1919 (Fig. 1).⁴⁰ By that time camphor was inexpensive and therefore easily available in every household.⁴¹ Made of different plain fabrics and tied to the boys' necks in different ways, their slight but reassuring weight perhaps providing solace. Of course, these small bags can easily be touched or put against the nose to protect them from foul smells, although none of the boys does so while posing. According to medieval Arabic medical theory, which greatly impacted Western medieval medicine, camphor – originating from trees in South East Asia and Southern China – was considered to be a fumigant with which the polluted air could be purified by holding it up to the nose and mouth.⁴² Because of its cool and dry properties camphor was deemed especially suitable to remedy hot conditions, the plague included.⁴³ In the Arab world, camphor was also appreciated as an additive to food and drinks in hot weather, as well as an aromatic suitable to perfume the hair of men with.⁴⁴

Medieval medicinal practices were deeply concerned with sight, sounds, tastes and smells: medieval healers evoked different senses to aid people towards wellness. Aromatics were an important part of medieval healthcare, this could include scented oils to be rubbed onto the skin, to be tasted with the mouth, or used to dispel a 'miasma'.⁴⁵ Smell can also be transformative, it can transport people through temporal loopholes where memories are connected through time and across space.⁴⁶ This makes it very powerful, as it is less tethered in time. But, perhaps this is true of all the senses: they have the ability to conjure, to prompt reminiscences, and to spark imagination. When kept in containers such smell experiences could be intentionally evoked, as may have been the case with the

⁴⁰ Eshyllt W. Jones, *Influenza 1918. Disease, Death, and Struggle in Winnipeg*. Toronto, Buffalo, London 2007.

⁴¹ The use of camphor against the Spanish flu was critiqued, not only as being useless, but also showing the dishonesty of pharmacists who were trying to make a profit. See Hernán Feldman, *The Spanish Flu in Argentina*. In: María-Isabel Porras-Gallo and Ryan A. Davis (eds.), *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919. Perspectives from the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas*. Rochester NY 2014, p. 194–214, here p. 208.

⁴² Robin A. Donkin, *Dragon's Brain Perfume. An Historical Geography of Camphor*. Leiden 1999, p. 140f.

⁴³ Donkin (note 42), p. 138, 166. On the sense of smell, see also Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past. Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*. Berkeley 2007, chapter 3; and Mary Thurlkill, *Sacred Scents in Early Christianity and Islam*. Lanham MD 2016.

⁴⁴ Thurlkill (note 43), p. 50, 52.

⁴⁵ Rawcliffe (note 36).

⁴⁶ Hamilakis: *Archaeology* (note 26), p. 84f.



Fig. 1: Boys wearing small bags with camphor around the time of the 1918–1919 Spanish flu. Source: <https://www.history.com/news/flu-masks-protection-photos> (accessed: 11/05/2020).

fragrances preserved in the small Mamluk sphere (Fig. 2).⁴⁷ This globe has been identified as a vessel for incense or perfumed candles made of ambergris, camphor and musk, emitting their odour through the sphere's pierced shell.⁴⁸ But its perfect roundness (there are no chains or hinges) and miniature scale (5.3 cm in diameter) provoke a more playful reading: perhaps the sphere was rolled from guest to guest on festive occasions with the smell spreading through the room while hands touched the ball.⁴⁹ But surely this lavishly decorated item was not

⁴⁷ Incense burner of pierced and engraved brass inlaid with silver, with images of the planets within roundels, Mamluk, Syria, 13th century, The Courtauld Gallery, London. <https://courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/collection/decorative-arts/islamic-metalwork/mamluk-incense-burner> (accessed: 25/06/2020).

⁴⁸ Rachel Ward, *Incense and Incense Burners in Mamluk Egypt and Syria*. In: *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 55 (1991/1992), p. 67–82.

⁴⁹ That these spheres could be rolled has been noticed by Ward (note 48), p. 78. The reference to the use on festive occasions was taken from the website of the Courtauld Gallery (note 47).

just meant to be touched in passing; its smallness is as an invitation to be picked up and examined closely, perhaps pressing the nose against the brass inlaid with silver to get an even closer sense of things.



Fig. 2: Incense burner of pierced and engraved brass inlaid with silver, with images of the planets within roundels, Mamluk, Syria, 13th century. The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London. Source: <https://museumcrush.org/> (accessed: 11/05/2020).

Our understanding of small artefacts as things that are intimately related to the body – like the camphor bags and incense burner – in which different sensory experiences come together, should be read as an invitation to modern medievalists to explore embodied experiences. This helps us to understand the lived experiences of a range of people for whom the material record is much richer than the written record (on which the master or grand narratives are too often based). To this end, we encouraged our authors to specifically address the interplay of the senses and also foreground three themes: materiality, the interplay between the senses, and the body. Highlighted below are the dynamic approaches within the papers and some examples of their interconnectedness. Each author has their own particular emphasis and research area, but as editors of the special issue we will draw out these themes and highlight the benefits of interdisciplinary work.

Materiality: Understanding the Sensory through Matter and Meaning

Small things – like all artefacts – are not just composed of a certain material (gold, stone, wood), but also have a materiality. This means that objects' materials are studied in terms of their social value through examinations of what they are made of, their size, their itineraries (the spatial and temporal routes objects take) as well as the theological, philosophical and somatic ideas concerning matter and reality.⁵⁰

Tracing the close sensory connection between object's materiality and the human body, Jennifer GERBER's study of the late medieval miracle story 'Erscheinung am Lichtmesstage' examines the experiences of one 'ordinary' woman and a candle at Candlemass (Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple). The woman refuses to part with the candle, which results in a struggle with an angel, causing it to break. This broken object becomes a locus for the transcendent and immanent: it renders visible and tangible the Divine on earth. Candles were obviously potent – they burn, melt and emit a scent as well as provide light and comfort. Indeed, this is true of wax in many contexts, it retains traces of corporeal engagements from hair to fingerprints.⁵¹

The comforting qualities that material items offered emerge from Patricia STROHMAIER's analysis of textile bags, some of which originated from the silk moth whose threads were made into fabric which was worn close to human skin. Through an analysis of the material, archaeological and written record, STROHMAIER explores these pouches beyond the well-known relic bags. A picture emerges that these small bags were worn close to the (living and dead) body, around the neck or on the hip, and were touched by the hand reaching into the interior and playing with the fringes and beading. These pouches sometimes

50 Roberta Gilchrist, *The Materiality of Medieval Heirlooms. From Biographical to Sacred Objects*. In: Hans Peter Hahn and Hadas Weiss (eds.), *Mobility, Meaning and Transformations of Things. Shifting Contexts of Material Culture Through Time and Space*. Oxford 2013, p. 170–182; Beth Williamson, *Material Culture and Medieval Christianity*. In: John H. Arnold (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity*. Oxford 2014, p. 61–72; and Karen Overbey, *Materiality and Place in a Medieval Scottish Pendant Reliquary*. In: *RES. Anthropology and Aesthetics* 65/66 (2014/2015), p. 242–258.

51 Philippa M. Hoskin and Elizabeth A. New, 'By the Impression of my Seal'. *Medieval Identity and Bureaucracy: A Case Study*. In: *The Antiquaries Journal* 99 (2019), p. 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003581519000015> (accessed: 11/05/2020); Brigitte M. Bedos-Rezak, *Status. An Impression*. In: John Cherry, Jessica Berenbeim and Lloyd de Beer (eds.), *Seals and Status. The Power of Objects*. London 2018, p. 45–53.

served as containers for relics, but, just as importantly, could also contain small items such as stones that held protective and healing qualities. While small textile bags functioned in much the same way as (reliquary) pendants worn on the body, STROHMAIER emphasizes how their soft and flexible materiality had a different impact on the human body and its sensory experiences than metalworks.

The Interplay of Senses: The Full Sensorium

Medieval liturgy where vision, sound, smell, taste, and touch merge in an architectural setting has been a locus for understanding how people's full sensorium was addressed.⁵² But here, again, emphasis is put on the theological and the philosophical and – as a result – a primarily male experience connected with a specific site – the medieval church building.⁵³ Our 'object-orientated' approach, however, conceives of small things themselves as micro-scale sites of multi-sensorial interaction by both men and women. This enables innovative exploration of objects' multiple sensorial qualities when specific site information is lacking.

Dasol KİM draws out multiple possibilities of sensorial experiences in her analysis of a sixteenth-century brass candlestick in the form of a hybrid body of a Muslim man twisted into a plant. This work challenges sensory hierarchies but also acts as an excellent example of how, through careful analogy, a full sensory experience can be captured. The candlestick suggests an implicit if not unconscious European desire to symbolically dominate and exoticise Islamic culture. The owner (a man?) would have touched, held and moved the body of the candlestick, that is, the body of 'the Muslim'. Does this mean that burning a candle – a multi-sensorial experience – can be understood as a way of controlling the Muslim man's body represented on the candlestick? Or do the light and warmth that emanate from the candle add to the alterity of the Muslim body?⁵⁴ Is there a desire for the 'Other' in the material statement of this object? Perhaps those things are evoked and captured within the sensorial interactions with this object. Controlling light has the power to alter experiences including the space within which the

52 Palazzo: Les cinq (note 17); Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon. Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium*. University Park PA 2010; Bissera Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics*. In: *Gesta* 50/2 (2011), p. 93–111; Bissera Pentcheva, *Performing the Sacred in Byzantium. Image, Breath, and Sound*. In: *PRI Performance Research International* 19/3 (2014), p. 120–128.

53 Though the use of saffron is explored in Schier's study of medieval nunneries. Volker Schier, *Probing the Mystery of the Use of Saffron in Medieval Nunneries*. In: *The Senses and Society* 5/1 (2010), p. 52–72.

54 Heng (note 34).

object is positioned.⁵⁵ This can also add to the sensorial and emotive aspects of intimacy, as KIM explores.

How the individual senses and their interplay may have been appreciated in Islamic culture is addressed by Cornelius BERTHOLD in his analysis of miniature Koran manuscripts. These rolls and octagonal codices share a microscopic script (1.5–2.5 mm) which is not suitable for reading. Instead, these items were carried or worn on the body, used as personal amulets and tied to military banner poles, invited to be touched, held and felt. Did these objects appeal to the entire sensorium and how can the magical qualities of these miniature Korans be understood? Perhaps their small size was meant to underscore God's omniscience and omnipotence, the source from which the healing, luck and triumph of the faithful originated. Inscribed with the words of God, amulets offered protection against disease and curses.⁵⁶ Can miniature Korans be seen also to have a meditative quality that was inspired by their size? One can imagine repeatedly touching their multi-sided cases, tracing a finger around the edges in a series of repetitive acts. These contributions are strong reminders of how bodies and artefacts can merge in different ways: while the miniature Korans were carried on their owners' bodies and were treasured as these moved with them, the brass candlestick embodied a possible European (colonial?) desire for Otherness.

Sensing the Body

Smaller personal items may reveal previously unknown things about identity including gender and age. These things are usually portable and often have an intimate relationship with the body and its senses, which contributes to their emotional and memorial qualities. For example, spindle whorls are understood to be embodied with generational knowledge of weaving but also with the understandings of shared labour, through the hands touching the whorl, the eyes witnessing its spinning and the smell of raw fabrics or materials.⁵⁷

In her paper on women and Scandinavian gold bracteates, Nancy L. WICKER highlights the gendered aspects of these items, which when worn around women's necks were intended not only to be ostentatiously displayed, to twinkle and shine but also to be touched as well as heard when in motion. WICKER's article

⁵⁵ Mikkel Bille and Tim. F. Sorensen, *An Anthropology of Luminosity. The Agency of Light*. In: *Journal of Material Culture* 12 (2007), p. 263–284.

⁵⁶ Thurlkill (note 43), p. 63.

⁵⁷ See for example Valerie Garver, *Sensory Experiences of Low-Status Female Textile Workers in the Carolingian World*. In: Griffiths / Starkey (note 16), p. 50–76.

seeks to understand the social agency these ornaments held for the female wearers and a mixed audience of viewers. Her study shows how the limits of available evidence should not be seen as a barrier to engaging with full sensory interpretations.

Another type of body, namely that of a horse, appears in Hans Sachs's 'Die Ellend Klagend Rosshaut' (1557). Bettina BILDHAUER emphasizes the sensory perceptions that the horse hide 'Rosshaut' voices when it is about to be cut into shoes by a shoemaker. Being able to talk about their suffering, the horse hide transcends its apparently inanimate nature to become a narrator. It tells its own story of a used and abused animal, whose hide was chemically treated, stretched and then transacted as leather. Sachs's narration fits the sixteenth-century intellectual climate in which debates on the human-animal hierarchy intensified, included within this were questions related to the mental and emotional capacities of animals.⁵⁸ BILDHAUER's article is very timely, Western scholarship has been slowly taking a post-humanist turn, where the human being (the 'Anthropos') is de-centred in research. This stems from generations of First Nations thinking, where all matter has agency: it acts on, interacts with, and reforms the world.⁵⁹ BILDHAUER follows, in a way, Anna TSING's idea of the impact of small things, whose anthropological and ethnographic study of a special mushroom – the matsutake – tells the big story of capitalism, war, displacement but also of hope and future.⁶⁰ These senses and their relationship with small things have always been part of the complex make-up of the world. Across time and space they are key to understanding the relations of people, places and things.

In Lieke SMITS's contribution, we see how clay is transformed to become imbued with the light of Christ. In her exploration of small clay Christ figures (ca. 15 cm) from the Northern Netherlands, play and playfulness are used as a way of imagining and understanding how these miniature Christ representations spoke to the senses in religious as well as domestic settings. Their small size and portability invited interaction and intimate connections. The sensory lives of these clay figurines and their owners are brought to life further through SMITS's analysis of find spots and late medieval devotional literature. It is only then that we see how these tiny objects spoke to a specific kind of body, namely that of the (cloistered) woman. While their spiritual and physical interactions with Christ's body

⁵⁸ Classen: *The Deepest* (note 1), p. 117–120.

⁵⁹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis 2013; Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss. A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. Oregon 2003.

⁶⁰ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton 2015.

were stimulated through the clay figures, this same playfulness gave religious men cause for concern because they feared this aspect of women's devotion could lead them to pursue their own forms of meditation that had the potential to disrupt the existing religious orthodoxy. SMITS's attention to these small items results in new ideas of sensorial religiosity being highlighted outside of traditional male-dominated narratives of devotion.

Appreciating the Senses: The Potency of Small Things

The contributions to this volume are united in the idea that the senses are important vehicles for understanding people's interactions with objects as well as the way these things impacted on their users or owners. Questioning the dominance of sight challenges medievalists to take into account the fullest possible range of senses and to incorporate the interplay of multiple senses. By doing so a more nuanced understanding of sensory experiences can be gained, something we set out to explore by specifically addressing miniature scale, an inescapable characteristic that impacts things' potency. As we show here, this power of the small has important stories to tell. In addition to surviving miniature artefacts themselves, references to such items are abundant and offer still untapped sources to be studied from different disciplines. We therefore envision that medievalists will bring more of an experiential focus to 'think with objects' as well as 'think with people' thereby bringing emotions and senses to the fore in interpretations.

Together these specially selected essays serve to underscore that an interdisciplinary dialogue addressing questions of how small objects impacted the lives of medieval people from different geographies is crucial for understanding the entangled sensorial relationship of people and things. Arising from this, further opportunities now exist to apply a sensorial approach to wider medieval worlds that acknowledges the gaps and ambiguities in the source material while revealing a more tangible past. As with any emerging area comes experimentation – and its successes and failures. Such a "leap of faith" is now required to explore the emotional and affective past, if we wish to avoid creating narratives of the past that at best are populated by "faceless blobs".⁶¹

⁶¹ The quotations are from: Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Archaeology and Theory. A Disciplinary Leap of Faith*. In: Roberta Gilchrist and Andrew Reynolds (eds.), *Reflections. 50 Years of Medieval Archaeology, 1957–2007* (Society Medieval Archaeology Monograph 30). Leeds 2009, p. 385–408;

Postscript: COVID-19

Preparations for this special issue began in 2019, yet most of the contributions were written when coronavirus COVID-19 swept the world. Much smaller than the objects under discussion here, this submicroscopic infectious agent that can infect all types of life forms also impacted the making of this journal, both on a practical and intellectual level. It prevented sensorial interactions of all kinds from the sight, smell and sounds of books in libraries, to the excitement we might have felt after the presentations at our organized and subsequently postponed author workshop (sponsored by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, scheduled in March 2020). Interestingly, lockdown heightened sensory experiences: the awareness of silence (no traffic) and amplification of other sounds (birds singing or our neighbour coughing), the smell of blooming trees and flowers not obscured by car and bus fumes, the ban on touch (social distancing makes us aware that sight and touch often go hand-in-hand),⁶² and the taste of breath while we exhale in our masks.⁶³ The realisation too, that communication itself is multisensory, the pivot to more virtual communication made it harder to ‘make sense of’ a classroom or meetings with colleagues without interacting in the press of bodies that typically make up our world. With our heightened sensorium and the subsequent awareness that we are so much more than mere ‘seeing’ beings, this current issue of ‘Das Mittelalter’, focusing on the sensory experiences that small objects provided to medieval people, arrives at an opportune moment when we are in a place to appreciate all that the senses can offer.

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Ruth Tringham, *Households with Faces*. In: Joan Gero and Margaret Conkey (eds.), *Engendering Archaeology. Women and Prehistory*. Oxford 1991, p. 93–131, here p. 94.

⁶² On touch (including the touching of artefacts in museums), see Classen: *The Deepest* (note 1); Smith (note 43), chapter 5.

⁶³ On modern perceptions of breath and smell, see Linn Burchert and Iva Rešetar (eds.), *Atem. Gestalterische, ökologische und soziale Dimensionen*. Berlin (forthcoming)

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